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Innovative teens put high-mileage vehicles to the test at O'Reilly Raceway park

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In this day of high gasoline prices, teenagers from Greenfield and Evansville proved Monday that they can really coax the mileage out of a gallon.

A car built by Greenfield Central High School students achieved 1,048.79 miles per gallon using stock parts from a 3.5 horsepower Briggs and Stratton engine.

And in the unlimited class, where the cars and Briggs engines may be modified, the team from Evansville Mater Dei High School coaxed 1,293.09 miles from a gallon of fuel.

They were competing in the Super Mileage Challenge on the oval race track at O'Reilly Raceway Park in Hendricks County.

"These are great results and both teams are repeat winners from last year," said Jim Thompson, Carmel, of the sponsoring Indiana Mathematics, Science and Technology Education Alliance.

"But the results for both winners were down a little this year from last year, probably because of the wind today," he said.

In this 14th annual competition to master fuel mileage, 53 cars took to the track and most averaged hundreds of miles to the gallon.

Their stock Briggs engines are commonly used on lawnmowers, mini-bikes and small go-karts.

"But the idea is that the kids in this competition learn to solve engineering problems, to work together and to get out into their community to find sponsorships and community support," Thompson said.

Evansville Mater Dei driver Andrew Ritter, a senior headed to Notre Dame next year, said the team's car in the unlimited category used a Briggs engine modified with the head of a Honda 50cc motorcycle engine.

Actually, these are not the kind of cars that most people are likely to drive, Thompson added. They're not legal on the streets. And the young drivers usually lay on their backs and peek through their knees or feet to see the track.

But on a race track, several of the young drivers said they learn the tricks of super mileage.

Most limit their speed to 15 miles an hour because that keeps down wind resistance. Higher speed means more drag.

And they turn off their engine as much as possible and let the car coast or push with the wind as much as possible on each lap. Some cars have electric starters. However, some drivers reach for a cord and give a pull to restart their engines while steering with the other hand.

Most of the cars are very light weight, made of metals and plastics. The three-year-old Greenfield car

was crafted by the students from aircraft-grade carbon fiber over an aluminum frame. The whole thing weighs 150 pounds — about the same as the driver.

Greenfield driver Tom Branstetter, a high school junior, said the car got 1,190 miles a gallon last year. So, the gusty winds at the Clermont track shaved about 142 miles from the car's record.
